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ABSTRACT

To understand the elusive nature of the community college, one must understand the process of assimilation that constantly reshapes its mission. Assimilation refers to the process of identifying educational solutions to ever-emerging, broad-based social issues and problems and incorporating these solutions into the community college's mission as new programs and courses. The community college's commitment to open access and curricular comprehensiveness, working in concert with the process of assimilation, provides the reason for and the means by which the community college constantly move to the edge of its mission. This movement is critical, for it is at the edge of the mission that the college intersects with the larger society, discovering new constituents with new needs. However, it is stability at the educational core of the institution that offers the community college the luxury of decentralizing its mission by constantly discovering new challenges and opportunities on the periphery. The tension generated from the dual focus of the mission on the core (e.g., transfer and vocational education) and the edge (e.g., developmental education and ties with business/industry) can become quite intense when community colleges do not know where their efforts should be placed. There are dangers and benefits associated with operating on the edge. Among the dangers are the potential for devoting too many resources to the periphery to the detriment of the educational core, the college's concept of its own mission, and the community college's place within traditional higher education. The most important benefits from operating on the edge are the vibrancy resulting from always discovering new worlds to conquer, the ability to respond to identified needs with few delays, and the flexibility to experiment. The most successful colleges will operate from a relatively stable core and from the edge of their mission, recognizing that the community college is an educational institution uniquely qualified to offer educational solutions to society's complex problems. (AYC)

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Institutions on the Edge:
America's Community Colleges

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by

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INSTITUTIONS ON THE EDGE:

AMERICA'S COMMUNITY COLLEGES

By

George B. Vaughan

For the past two decades, I have devoted most of my waking hours to working in, thinking about, and writing about the American community college. I labored in the trenches and ascended to the mountain top. I taught in one community college and served as academic dean in two others; I was founding president of one and served as president of yet another, for a total of 17 years; I served as chair of the American Association of Community Colleges' (AACJC) 1,000-member Presidents Academy and on the executive committee of the AACJC's board of directors; I have written articles on the history, mission, and philosophy of the community college and a book that has been referred to as the definitive work on the community college presidency. For the past two years I have been a professor of higher education; I teach a course on the history, philosophy, and mission of the community college, a course which I have taught for the past 13 years; I am fairly intelligent.

By any yardstick, I <u>should</u> understand the American community college. Yet, until recently, a clear understanding of the community college eluded me. My spouse, Peggy Vaughan, a shrewd observer of the community college in her own right, in explaining the elusive nature of the community college, likens it to the mythical sea-god Proteus, for, once you think you have the

community college within your grasp, like Proteus it often changes shape. What is the shape of the community college in America, and why is its nature so elusive? Why do even the community college's most articulate and intelligent leaders have difficulty in explaining its Proteus-like characteristics? Why is it difficult to explain to the public in simple and understandable terms the twin towers of the community college philosophy: open access and comprehensiveness? And, are the community college's supporters justified in describing these institutions as unique?

Assimilation, Open Access, and Comprehensiveness

To understand the elusive nature of the community college, one must understand the process of assimilation that constantly reshapes its mission. Assimilation refers to the process of identifying educational solutions to ever-emerging, broad-based social issues and problems and incorporating these solutions into the community college's mission as new programs and courses. Some of the courses and programs, especially those offered outside of traditional degree and certificate programs, will remain on the edge of the mission, while others will be incorporated into the core curriculum. Assimilation, then, as used in the following discussion, is more complex than simply reacting to perceived community needs by developing new courses and programs. Limiting the community college's role to reacting to community needs (more computer operators, more airline

mechanics, more nurses) is to define its role too narrowly. Community colleges do much more than mirror society, a stance I once assigned them. The effective community college provides the leadership that is required to anticipate movements within society and to assimilate them into the college's educational mission.

Assimilation in relationship to the community college's mission makes little sense unless viewed in concert with open access and comprehensiveness. One of the community college's key contributions to higher education is its commitment to an open access admissions policy ("open door" was the dominant term used in the 1960s and 1970s). What normally comes to mind when one thinks of these colleges is how they have made it possible for millions of students to enter college who might otherwise have been denied admission to any institution of higher education. Understanding the community college's commitment to open access is complex, for the commitment did not, like some modern-day Athena springing from the head of Zeus, burst forth full grown from the head of two-year college leaders, past or present, such as William Rainey Harper, Leonard Koos, Edmund Gleazer, Dale Parnell or anyone else. Rather, open access became feasible from an educational point of view (in contrast to political and socioeconomic points of view) when the community college moved away from serving mainly traditional college-age students enrolled primarily in transfer programs and began operating more and more on the ever-changing periphery of its mission,

constantly identifying new needs, new students, and new programs, some of which offered no college credit, at least as traditionally defined.

Developing in concert with open access was the community college's comprehensive curriculum. Adopting a policy of open access did much more than open the community college's doors to diverse students: open access made it possible, desirable, and ultimately mandatory for the community college's mission to expand beyond service to traditional students through traditional courses and programs, although these students continue to be important. Once community colleges committed themselves to open access, everyone became fair game: academically weak students; homemakers returning to college; older adults from every walk of life; honor students; prisoners; workers needing training and retraining; new citizens, old citizens, and non-citizens; children for "kiddie kolleges" and retirees for condo colleges; dropouts, stopouts, and dropins; illiterates and dilettantes with Ph.D.'s; and literally millions and millions of students enrolled in non-credit courses whose breadth is limited only by the lively and at times bizarre imagination of the individuals requesting courses and those planning them.

The community college's commitment to open access and comprehensiveness, working in concert with assimilation, provides the reason for and the means by which the institution constantly moves to the edge of its mission. This movement is critical, for it is at the edge of the mission where the college intersects

with the larger society, discovering new constituents with new needs, converting these needs into courses and programs, and assimilating many of them into the core of the mission. Just as critical as moving to the edge of the mission is determining what is assimilated into the college's mission and especially into its core, for how this question is answered determines whether the community college will be viewed as an institution of higher education or as a pseudo-social agency, neglecting its educational mission in favor of providing employment services, child care, and any number of services that are only indirectly related to its educational mission. Comprehensiveness gives meaning to open access, assuring that students will have access to a variety of programs that meet their diverse educational needs. Many public four-year universities are required by law to admit all residents in the state who graduate from high school, but these universities provide access only to the baccalaureate programs and therefore are not comprehensive in the same sense as are community colleges. Comprehensiveness, as used in this discussion, implies that students have a choice of one and two-year programs, with the latter terminating at the end of two years or providing the first two years of the baccalaureate degree. Moreover, a two-year institution without a comprehensive program does not fit the definition of comprehensiveness as used here.

Comprehensiveness as a concept and in practice did more than assure diverse courses and programs; it had a profound effect on

the college mission. Once the idea that previously excluded courses, programs, and students were acceptable for inclusion under the community college's ever-expanding mission, community college leaders were given (or took) the license (supporters of the community college would say mandate) required to serve diverse groups through diverse programs and courses.

The Community College's Uniqueness

Understanding the educational core is key to understanding the community college's uniqueness, for it is the core which ties the community college to the rest of higher education. The educational core must be sound, relatively stable, and understood by the public, for it is this core that gives the community college legitimacy as an institution of higher education; it is this core that represents stability and reflects the image most members of society associate with institutions of higher education; it is stability at the core that offers the community college the luxury of decentralizing its mission by constantly discovering new challenges and opportunities on the periphery. Included in the educational core are degree, diploma, and year-long certificate programs that make up a coherent, integrated educational experience normally resulting in the awarding of a degree or certificate certifying a student's competence in a field of study.[1] By suggesting that the core is relatively

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[1]Non-credit offerings at community colleges consist of such a mishmash of activities and courses and vary so much from campus to campus that it is almost impossible to classify them. For the

stable, it is not meant to imply that the core does not change at an individual college or that the programs that make up the core are identical at all community colleges. On the contrary, the effective community college constantly examines the core, making additions and deletions when needed, although changes occur less often and are more gradual in the core than at the edge. While the programs making up the educational core at one community college may differ dramatically from those at another one, the educational core at all comprehensive community colleges are similar in that they contain those elements that distinguish the community college as an institution of higher education and sets it apart from social agencies or businesses and industries that provide education and training. The educational core is not to be confused with those courses that make up the general education core on some campuses, nor is it to be viewed as a solid, inflexible mass. Moreover, the educational core, while extremely important, makes up only a part of the institutional mission.

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purpose of this discussion, those non-credit activities that are offered as structured courses would be assigned to the periphery of the mission. Many non-credit courses have the potential of becoming credit courses and ultimately becoming a part of the core. An example is a course in word processing, which may have begun as a non-credit course but later became a credit course and an integral part of degree programs in office skills. This example also serves to illustrate how core courses may, and should, move back to the periphery. Assuming beginning word processing is taught in high school and no longer needs to be included in the office skills program at the community college, the course may again be taught by the college as a non-credit course--returned to the periphery--for individuals who wish to learn the skills of word processing but who do not need or desire college credit. See footnote two for a discussion of activities which often fall under the rubric of non-credit offerings but which are not a part of the institution's educational mission.

Operating from the core, while extremely important, is not enough to support the community college's comprehensive mission and certainly not enough to support its claim to uniqueness. The community college mission must be both broad and flexible; indeed, it must extend beyond the educational core to its very edge, for it is at the edge where many innovative and exciting things happen. To accomplish its mission, a portion of the institution's human and fiscal resources must be devoted to interacting with broad movements within society, an interaction that initially takes place at the edge of its mission, yet offers the potential for assimilating activities from the edge into the educational core. A result is that community colleges, by devoting resources to activities on the edge of the mission, keep the mission in a perpetual state of flux, while at the same time projecting an image of stability.

The propensity of the community college's mission to exist in a perpetual state of flux creates problems in understanding these colleges, both among members of the college community and among members of external groups. For example, in the 1990 May/June issue of Change, an article by The Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching states that due to the rapid growth of community colleges in the 1960s and early 1970s "it's a reasonable assumption that these colleges are in some disarray regarding mission and purpose" (p. 24). Further, quoting from the Commission on the Future of Community Colleges, the article notes that now that the growth has slowed, "Community colleges

now encounter ambivalence . . . about their role and mission, and competing priorities within the colleges" (p. 24).

In line with the comments from Change, I recall that during my tenure as president I often wondered when the mission would "settle down," when it would cease to be in disarray, and when the true mission would reveal itself from on high, ending any ambivalence I had regarding the proper role of the community college. I now realize that the answer is that if the community college is to be effective, the mission should not settle down, that it always has been and always will be in a state of flux--it is not in disarray as some perceive it--and that this state of flux is a direct result of operating from both its edge and its core and that this state is natural and good. Moreover, because of this dual-focused mission of community colleges, competing priorities will always be present. Yet the tension inherent in the core-edge relationship is one of the community college's greatest strengths rather than a weakness, as is often perceived. Once the mission is viewed in this way, it can be understood, interpreted, and utilized in ways that best serve the college and the community. Indeed, community college leaders and others can and should quit worrying about when (or if) the mission is going to settle down (it won't) and view the tensions resulting from a mission in flux as positive and use those tensions creatively.

My argument is that the community college's uniqueness lies in its ability and willingness to operate concurrently from a relatively stable educational core and from the edge of its

mission where broad movements are constantly changing the face of society. The community college then assimilates major aspects of these movements into its mission quickly and efficiently, which results in additional educational courses and programs. It is my belief that operating concurrently from an educational core and from the mission's edge creates a dynamic tension (the descriptive phrase once used by Charles Atlas for his exercise program guaranteed to enhance the potential of all 97-pound weaklings with sand in their faces) that keeps the community college vibrant, spontaneous, and able to serve society's ever-changing needs. Moreover, the edge-core relationship and the resulting tensions create contribute to the community college's unique character.

The community college's major contribution, then, lies in its interaction with the larger society, an interaction that requires a relatively stable core and an ever-evolving edge, that requires leadership to identify community needs and to solve those needs through its mission as an educational institution. To elaborate: no institution of higher education in America has been more willing than the community college to venture to the periphery of its mission and, once there, to develop courses and programs emanating from the broader needs of society, needs that have traditionally been ignored by much of the rest of higher education. It is in its role of serving as the frontier scout of higher education, always moving to an ever-changing edge, an edge which, much as Frederick Jackson Turner's American frontier

varied from time to time and place to place, varies from institution to institution and from one stage of institutional development to another, that the community college has played a major role in shaping American higher education and has contributed so much to American society; it is on the edge where new needs are discovered, many of which are assimilated into the the institutional mission as new courses and programs; it is on the edge where assimilation begins and where the community college obtains much of its unique character. Indeed, operating on the edge of the mission keeps community colleges alive, keeps them exciting places in which to work and learn, and keeps them in the vanguard of interacting with society's ever-changing needs.

One can point to many instances where community colleges have moved to the edge of their mission, identified needs, developed programs and courses, made them a part of the mission, and, in some cases, a part of the educational core. One outstanding example is the community college's work with adults, work that began on the periphery, primarily through continuing education, but which is now a stable and important part of the college's mission. Another example is pre-college or developmental education, today a key component of the community college's mission but one that was brought into the mission only after the community college's commitment to open access opened the door of higher education to those segments of society lacking the academic prerequisites for college-level work.

The distinction between the edge and the core is often unclear (for example, developmental education, while extremely important to the community college in fulfilling its mission, is not a part of the educational core, regardless of how many students it serves or how many resources it consumes), thereby causing tension between the more traditional faculty members (those who teach college transfer courses, for example) and those members of the college community who believe that the college should work to solve all of society's needs (some continuing education administrators, academic deans and presidents). In some cases, working with business and industry for example, part of the needs may be met on the edge of the mission while others may be met at its core; a course designed to train workers to assemble computers would meet a business's needs from the edge; an associate's degree program in data processing would meet the same industry's needs from the core.

The tension generated from the dual focus of the mission can become quite intense when community colleges do not know where their efforts should be placed. For example, while some community colleges have done well in developing programs to reduce adult illiteracy, many community colleges (especially those whose mission does not include adult basic education) do not know where adult literacy programs and courses should be placed. Similarly, the community college's strong ties with business and industry create a potential battleground where conflicts between the core and the edge are fought. Should the

community college provide training for specific industries? If so, should the courses be paid for by the industry or by the taxpayer? What courses should remain on the edge, never to become part of the core? When should the community college say no to requests for new courses, even those that would likely remain forever on the periphery, never to enter the core? And, when should a community college develop a degree or diploma program to serve the new industry in town, as has been done in many cases, thereby making a long-term commitment of resources and, in the process, reshaping the college's mission? Community college leaders must ask these and similar questions as they work with business and industry, keeping in mind that the community college's primary mission is to offer educational solutions to a number of society's problems, not to serve as a social agency or as the economic development arm of a specific industry, state, or local government.[2]

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[2]Just as the community college's primary mission is educational and not social or economic, neither is it recreational or cultural. Nevertheless, adding to the difficulty of understanding the community college's mission is that the institution's educational mission is often confused with other functions performed by the college. For example, it is important for the community college to sponsor art exhibits, craft fairs, sports events, film festivals, musical concerts, drama productions, health fairs, and any number of other events that enrich the lives of the citizens served by the college. These functions, however, are performed (other than when they are a direct outgrowth of the curriculum, i.e. a drama production) by the community college because it is a good citizen of its community. Just as a YWCA sponsors blood drives or just as a fire station in a rural area sponsors the Saturday night dance, the community college sponsors events because of its citizenship role, a very important role and one that likely enhances the institution's educational mission but one which is not directly a part of the educational mission. While the line

There is one major potential flaw in devoting resources to operating on the edge of the mission: waiting at the edge of the mission are any number of problems looking for solutions. Indeed, the problems are too numerous for any single entity in society to deal with effectively, including the community college. The result is that priorities have to be established (community colleges really cannot nor should not try to do everything) and decisions must be made: what will the community college assimilate into its mission; what will be brought into the core; what will be left at the edge; and what will be left for others to deal with? Of course, this is where leadership comes into play and is one reason why some community colleges are more successful than others.

Dangers on the Edge

A major danger from operating on the edge has been alluded to already: when an institution ventures beyond the educational core, beyond what is perceived as the traditional role of higher education, it encounters a number of problems seeking solutions. These problems, which can also be seen as opportunities for the community college to move into new areas and in new directions, are almost limitless and are often tempting territory for those community college leaders committed to solving all of society's

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between the role of the community college functioning as a citizen of the community and as an educational institution is often a thin one, it is nevertheless an important one to draw if one is to understand these colleges.

ills. But the leader must be careful, for if one loses sight of the need to maintain a viable educational core and ventures too far afield of the college's comprehensive mission, the periphery suddenly becomes quicksand absorbing all the resources the college can muster, leaving little or nothing to devote to the more traditional core, thereby weakening and even destroying the institution's claim to be viewed (and funded) as an institution of higher education. The dilemmas are real for most community college leaders. For example, does the community college deal with adult literacy as many have chosen to do? Or, does it deal with child care, as some have chosen to do? Where does it limit itself in working with business and industry? Should the community college devote resources to aiding unwed mothers? Drug abusers? The homeless? Find jobs for the unemployed? Provide recreational facilities for the community? Serve as an art gallery? A theatre? The list is indeed endless. But to try to do all things, to try to be all things to all people as many community colleges did during the 1960s and 1970s and some still do, is to dissipate the mission beyond recognition and to pull so many resources from the core that the community college no longer functions as an institution of higher learning. Once this happens, the community college has trouble justifying funding from the sources that normally finance higher education.

A second danger closely related to the above, and one that the community college's critics are quick to point out, is that if an inordinate number of resources are devoted to the edge and

the core is neglected, the mission is in such a state of flux (disarray probably is the correct word at this stage) that no one understands what the college is committed to, including the institution's leaders, for there are no anchors holding the institution in place, no core through which courses and programs move to be reviewed by the faculty, administration, and board before being considered for inclusion in the mission's core. A result is that community college leaders resort to cliches when describing the mission. A fuzzy explanation of the mission is especially troubling to legislators who are expected to fund something that they do not understand, something that even community college leaders are unable to justify or even describe clearly for them.

A third danger, and one that community college leaders have given scant attention to, is that by devoting too many resources to operating on the edge of traditional higher education, the community college is threatened with being excluded from being a part of higher education, especially by those segments of society that continue to hold a traditional view of what constitutes higher education. Even when included as members of the academy, some of the community college's fringe operations cause it to be viewed as inferior to four-year institutions by some members of society and certainly by many four-year faculties, resulting in community colleges being banned intellectually, if not literally, from membership in the academy. It should be noted, however, that as more and more institutions view themselves as

"interactive universities," the idea of interacting with events on the mission's edge is becoming more widely accepted, even viewed as avant-garde, by higher education leaders. (Here again, as was true with serving older students, the community college may well have proven to have fulfilled its frontier scout's role with vision, vitality, and practicality.)

A final danger, and one that haunts most community college leaders, is how, once courses and programs are brought into the core, they can be returned to the periphery (and dropped completely, when the need arises) without undue stress on affected faculty members and other members of the college community and without conflict with special interest groups who want their programs to remain a part of the core. For example, today many community colleges have invested money in computer equipment and personnel well beyond the current market demand for certain graduates and even beyond the demand for word processing courses, a demand that will likely continue to decline as school children become "computer literate." The creative tensions that result in moving from the edge to the core are often replaced by destructive conflicts when programs are phased out. Will personnel be terminated? Will the equipment remain idle, only to become outdated? Will the administration confront the issue of supply and demand? Can the program be redirected? These and other questions must be dealt with if the community college is to continue to shape its mission with community needs in mind and if it is to profit fully from its unique mission.

Returns from the Edge

The most important benefit from operating on the edge is the vibrancy resulting from always discovering new worlds to conquer. Administrators and faculty can work with any number of community agencies in developing new programs and courses; faculty have the opportunity to teach new courses; the institution has the feeling of movement, of being involved, and of being responsive. Waiting on the edge are new worlds to conquer, new constituents to serve, and new ways of looking at old problems.

A second advantage of operating on the edge is that every member of the college community is accustomed to constant change, even though much of the change is subtle; therefore, when new programs and courses are added and old ones are eliminated, it is less traumatic than is the case in more traditional institutions of higher education.

A third advantage, and it is here that the community college has been the leader and the envy of much of the rest of higher education, or at least of administrators, is the ability of the community college to respond to many needs without the delay often encountered by much of the rest of higher education. Many community colleges can identify a training need one day and have a training program in operation within a week or less, an impossibility when new courses and programs must be approved by a seemingly endless number of committees and individuals.

A fourth advantage from operating on the edge is that it is here that community colleges can experiment, deciding which

courses and programs should become a part of the college's core and which ones should be left on the edge and perhaps ultimately dropped as being unsuited to the educational mission of the institution. Those courses that are designed to train workers for specific jobs are by definition short-term and rarely make it into the core, nor should they. On the other hand, unlike courses offered by the university's extension service and many continuing education programs, most credit courses offered by the community college have the potential of moving into the core. Again turning to Turner's concept of the frontier where he saw reforms occurring before they were accepted by the more settled areas, the edge represents the frontier of the mission where curriculum stability meets change, where new needs are identified, transferred into the core, dealt with on the edge, or left for others to deal with.

To Conclude

I have heard the community college's uniqueness alluded to by literally hundreds of speakers, including governors, senators, members of congress, business leaders, leaders of America's most prestigious educational associations, university presidents, and at least one president of the United States. Many of the descriptions of the community college's uniqueness have become little more than cliches: the community college is unique because it is a teaching institution whose faculty members need not do research; the community college is unique because it cares

about students; it is unique because it is responsive to community needs; and the list continues. One former community college president even proclaimed with great pride that the community college is uniquely suited to "take a stand against the evil of elitism," the university. For years, with the exception of the "evil of elitism," I bought the rhetoric, cliches and all, and like every good community college president, preached my own sermons on the uniqueness of the community college to the Rotary clubs across our great land, limiting my message to popular themes and levels of understanding.

Cliches used to describe the community college, while essentially true, are limited in capturing the community college's uniqueness. With the exception of taking a stand against the evil of elitism, each of the above claims for the community college's uniqueness is basically true. Yet singularly or collectively the list is incomplete in its description of the community college as a unique institution of higher education, for the activities and beliefs claimed as being uniquely the community college's are duplicated in one form or another and to one degree or another on the campuses of practically every institution of higher education in the nation.

In spite of my becoming more critical and perhaps a bit cynical over the years regarding some of the cliches surrounding the community college, my belief in the community college's uniqueness has never left me, for it not only encompasses Proteus-like characteristics but thrives on them, always yielding

something slightly different from what appeared within one's grasp. By understanding the relationship between the core, the periphery, and the process of assimilation, each college can better understand its own mission and relate it to its own unique set of circumstances.

With the above in mind, community college leaders must understand that there are many challenges waiting to be explored at the edge of the community college's mission as the mission is reshaped to reflect societal changes. Meanwhile, the most successful community colleges will continue to operate from both a relatively stable core and from the edge of their mission, using the tensions resulting from such an operation in positive ways, always recognizing that the community college is an educational institution uniquely qualified to offer educational solutions to the complex issues facing society now and in the future.

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